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THE REVERSUS, A FISHING TALE OF  
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

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TRULY a remarkable fish story that which should require an analysis of the earliest sources of American history in order to attest its credibility. Nevertheless there lies buried among the contemporary narratives that have come down to us of the second voyage of Columbus, in 1494, a tale of fish and fishermen of such interest and novelty, and apparent truthfulness, as will repay attention on the part of present-day students of history and natural science.

The original narrator of the fishing incident about to be described appears to have been Columbus himself. Unfortunately, however, the log or journal kept by the great navigator during his second voyage is no longer extant; but we possess abridgments of it in what passes for the "Life of Columbus," by his son Ferdinand, and also in the "History of the Indies" which we owe to that man of revered memory, Bartolomé de las Casas.

There has also been preserved for us a letter written by a naturalist who accompanied Columbus during his second voyage, Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca; and much information derived from personal intercourse with the admiral and the men under his command is embodied in the writings of Peter Martyr of Anghera, sometimes styled the "father of American history," and in the chronicles of Andrés Bernaldez, curate of Los Palacios, in Andalusia. It is of record that Columbus placed his journals and other papers in the hands of Bernaldez, whose guest he was in 1496. Thirteen chapters of the curate's book are devoted to an account of Columbus and his discoveries. These, then, are the original sources to be consulted in regard to the happenings which took place during the memorable second voyage to the West Indies.

From the writings that have just been mentioned we learn that the Spaniards came upon a party of native fishermen off the coast of Cuba who were engaged in the capture of marine turtles, the means employed by them for that purpose being wholly unlike anything ever seen or heard of in Europe. In a word, it consisted in the use of a sucking-fish, known to naturalists as the *Remora*, which, after having been caught and tethered (so to speak) by means of a cord attached to its body, was allowed to fasten itself by its sucking disc to another fish or turtle, whereupon both were drawn in. Historians have frequently repeated the narrative, but only a single naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt,

appears to have inquired into the premises at all carefully. It may therefore be instructive for us to compare two or three of the different versions that are contained in the original sources, after which we may be better able to interpret the actual facts.

First of all it will be of interest to traverse in imagination with Columbus the route by which he steered his caravels amid the verdant, perfume-laden isles that dot the sea near Cuba, as he sailed westward in the month of May, 1494, with the project not only of finding a new route to India, but of actually sailing round the world. This we know from what Ferdinand Columbus tells us in a passage undoubtedly derived from his father's journal of the second voyage, "that if he had had abundance of provisions he would not have returned to Spain except by way of the East."<sup>1</sup> Through the irony of fate the Admiral was obliged to turn back from near that point where the fishing scene was witnessed, when two or three days more sailing would have proved to him the insular character of Cuba, and might have led to the immediate discovery of Yucatan, or Mexico.

We shall let Ferdinand tell us in his own language, which we may be sure follows very closely his father's journal, of what took place as the first European vessels to navigate along the southern coast of Cuba came upon the Queen's Gardens. The English rendering here given is found in the second volume of "Churchill's Voyages" (p. 536), and reads thus:

On Saturday, the 3d of May, the Admiral resolved to sail over from Cuba to Jamaica, that he might not leave it behind without knowing whether the report of such plenty of gold they heard there was in it, prov'd true; and the wind being fair, and he almost half way over, discovered it on Sunday. Upon Monday he came to an anchor, and thought it the beautifullest island of any he had yet seen in the Indies, and such multitudes of people in great and small canoes came abroad that it was astonishing. . . .

The wind being somewhat contrary, the Admiral could not make so much way as he wished, till on Tuesday the 13th of May he resolved to stand for Cuba, to keep along its coast, designing not to return till he had sailed 5 or 600 leagues, and were satisfied whether it were an island or continent. . . .

The nearer they sailed to Cuba, the higher and pleasanter the little islands appeared which were all over that sea, and it being a matter of difficulty and to no purpose to give every one of them a name, the Admiral called them all in general *Jardín de la Reina*, the Queen's Garden. . . . In these islands they saw crows and cranes like those of Spain, the sea-crows [gulls], and infinite numbers of little birds that sung sweetly, and the air was as sweet as if they had been among roses, and the finest perfumes in the world; yet the danger was very great, there being such abundance of channels, that much time was spent in finding the way out.

In one of these channels they spy'd a canoe of Indian fishermen, who very quietly, without the least concern, awaited the boat which was making towards them, and being come near, made a sign to them in it to attend till they had done fishing.

<sup>1</sup> "Hist." p. 166.

Their manner of fishing was so strange and new to our men, that they were willing to comply with them. It was thus: they had ty'd some small fishes they call *Reverso* by the tail, which run themselves against other fish, and with a certain roughness they have from the head to the middle of the back they stick fast to the next fish they meet; and when the Indians perceive it drawing their line, they hand them both in together. And it was a tortoise our men saw so taken by those fishermen, that fish [the *Reverso*] clinging about the neck of it, where they generally fasten, being by that means safe from the other fish biting them; and we have seen them fasten upon vast sharks.

When the Indians in the canoe had taken their tortoise, and two other fishes they had before, they presently came very friendly to the boat, to know what our men would have, and by their directions went along aboard the ships, where the Admiral treated them very courteously. . . .

Proceeding thence, and bearing up closer to Cuba, they saw tortoises of a vast bigness, and in such numbers that they covered the sea. At break of day they saw such a cloud of sea-crows that they darkened the sun, coming from the seaward to the island, where they all lighted; besides them, abundance of pigeons, and birds of other sorts were seen, and the next day there came such swarms of butterflies that they darkened the air, and lasted till night, when the rain carried them away. . . .

In the brief description which is here given of the captive "fisherman-fish," or *Reverso*, we are told that it has a peculiar asperity along the back. Ferdinand's "Historie" has not come down to us in its original Spanish form, but is known only in translations, the earliest being that of Ulloa, in Italian. It may be that the English rendering to the effect that the *Reverso* was armed with "a certain roughness from the head to the middle of the back" does not accurately convey the sense of the original. At all events a slightly different description is given in the French version, which reads: "certain petit poisson qui porte de piquants crochus se relevant à contresens de son corps," etc. The latter characterization agrees better with the porcupine-fish, or *Diodon*, than the *Remora*, and both are included under the term of "*Reversus*" by the "fathers" of ichthyology, one being called the spinous, and the other the anguilliform variety.

In the histories of Las Casas and Herrera we read practically the same account of fishing with the *Reversus* as that given by Ferdinand Columbus. Of similar purport, also, but closely agreeing in literary style with the writings of the famous discoverer, is the account of the same fishing scene in Queen's Gardens which we find in the chronicles of Andrés Bernaldez.<sup>2</sup> We now present this passage in English form.

#### CHAPTER CXXVI

##### *Of a great number of Islands which were Discovered*

The Admiral set sail [from Jamaica] with his three caravels, and sailed 24 leagues towards the west, as far as the gulf Buen Tiempo. . . . On Whitsunday, 1494, they stopped at a place which was uninhabited—but not from the inclemency of the sky, or the barrenness of the soil—in the midst of a large grove of palm-trees, which seemed to reach from the sea-shore to the very heavens.

<sup>2</sup> "Hist. Reyes Catól.," Cap. 126.

. . . Here they all rested themselves upon the grass about these fountains, enjoying the charming fragrance of the flowers, and the melody of the song of birds, so many and so sweet, and the shade of the palm trees, so tall and so beautiful, that the whole was a wonder. . . . As the number of islands in this region was so great that he could not give to each a separate name, the Admiral called them all by the common name of the Queen's Gardens.

On the day following, the Admiral being very desirous to fall in with some natives with whom he might parley, there came a canoe to hunt for fish:—for they call it hunting, and they hunt for one fish with others of a particular kind. They have certain fishes which they hold by a line fastened to their tails, and which are like conger-eels in shape, and have a large mouth [*i. e.*, head] completely covered with suckers, like the octopus. They are very fierce, like our ferrets, and when they are thrown into the water they fly to fasten themselves upon whatsoever fish they may espy, and sooner die than let go their hold till they are drawn out of the water.

The hunting fish is very light, and as soon as he has taken hold, the Indians draw him by the long cord attached to his body, and in this manner they take a fish each time on drawing both to the surface of the water.

As these hunters were at a distance from the caravel, the Admiral sent his boats to them with armed men, contriving it so that they should not escape to the land. As the boats came up to them, these hunters called out to the men in mildest manner and as unconcernedly as if they had known them all their lives, to hold off, because one of the fishes had fastened upon the under side of a large turtle, and they must wait till they had got it into the canoe. This our men did, and afterwards they took the canoe, and those in it, together with four turtles, each of which was three cubits in length, and brought them to the ships of the Admiral; and there they gave some account of these islands, and of their cacique who was close at hand, and had sent them to hunt. They asked the Admiral to go on shore, and they would make for him a great feast and would give him all of the four turtles they had caught.

Clearly the description just given refers to the "eel-like *Reversus*" or *Remora*, and so far as the description goes it is a more dependable sketch than the portrayal which Peter Martyr has preserved for us in the pioneer collection of voyages,<sup>3</sup> published in 1504, and "*De Rebus Oceanis*" of 1511. The following narrative is taken from the fifteenth chapter of the "*Libretto*":

Continuing [along the coast of Cuba] they found further onward some fishermen in certain of their boats of wood excavated like *zopoli*, who were fishing. In this manner they had a fish of a form unknown to us, which has the body of an eel and larger: and upon the head it has a certain very tender skin which appears like a large purse. And this fish they drag, tied with a cord to the edge of the boat, because it can not endure a breath of air. And when they see any large fish or reptile, they loosen the noose and this fish at once darts like an arrow at the fish or other creature, throwing over them this skin which he has upon his head; which he holds so firmly that they are not able to escape, and he does not leave them if they are not taken from the water; but as soon as he feels the air he leaves his prey and the fishermen quickly seize it. And in the presence of our people they took four large turtles which they gave our people for a very delicate food.

<sup>3</sup> "*Libretto de Tutta la Navigatione de Re de Spagna, de le Isole et Terreni Novamente Trovati.*" The text for this libretto was written some time previous to the summer of 1501, and was reproduced in the fourth book of the "*Paesi Novamente Retrovati*," first published at Vicenza in 1507.

The entertaining writer whom we have just quoted gives a more elaborate account of this same incident, and manner of fishing with the Reversus, in the work by which he is best known, the "Decades of the Ocean," first published in 1511; but it is not necessary to follow these later modifications.

The next writer to treat of the same theme, with considerable enlargement of detail, is the well-known historian Oviedo, whose "Sumario" was published in 1516, and larger work on the "History of the Indies" in 1535. Oviedo gives a lively account of the intelligence of the "fisherman-fish," which he asserts was reared in captivity by the natives and trained to catch prey "as huntsmen or falconers use hounds or hawks in their game." But in his description of the fish itself Oviedo has strangely confused the characters of the sucking-fish with those of Diodon. Thus, he speaks of the "reverso" as being covered with imbricating scales, upon which are "certain prickles very sharp and strong, whereby he fastens himself to what fish he pleaseth; and these prickly scales he hath on most parts of his body."<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand Columbus also, as we have seen, describes the reverso as armed with backwardly pointing spines, which of course suggests Diodon. And it is Diodon that we find figured alongside of the Remora in sixteenth to eighteenth century ichthyological writings as if it were a second variety or "species" of the so-called "Reversus." Its curious antics on being hooked were first described by Père Du Tertre in 1657.<sup>5</sup>

One may inquire whence the name Reversus was derived; and the answer would seem to be that it is cognate in meaning with the classic name of the fish Remora, or Echeneis, which signifies "holding back."<sup>6</sup> That the Remora, or "ship-holder," actually impeded the progress of sailing vessels is an extremely ancient legend, which has survived to modern times.<sup>7</sup> The subject is illustrated in Greek and Roman ceramic art, and occurs repeatedly in classic as well as medieval literature. In the accompanying figure we have reproduced one of the earliest woodcuts in printed books depicting the Remora in the act of retarding a vessel; it is from the 1536 edition of the "Hortus Sanitatis." The illustration here given does not differ materially from that found in the *editio princeps* of this curious work, printed in 1479. The fishing scenes contained in the first editions respectively of the "Hortus Sanitatis" and "Dialogues of Ceatures Moralyzed" are probably the first of their kind to be introduced into printed books. Copies are also shown of Gesner's (1558) and Aldrovandi's (1638) representations of

<sup>4</sup> This sentence is taken from "Purchas his Pilgrimes," III., p. 994.

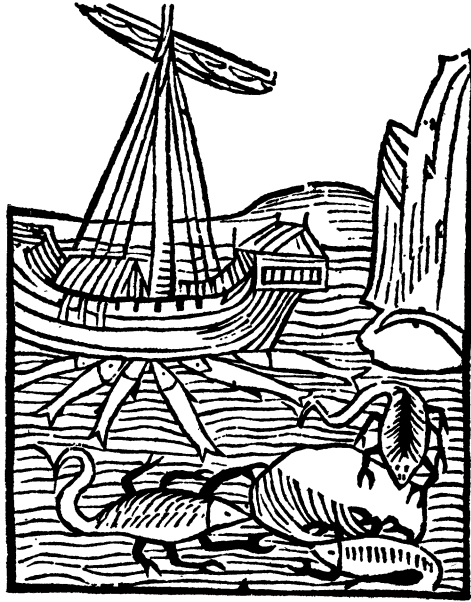
<sup>5</sup> "Hist. Antilles," II., p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> The Cuban naturalist Felipe Poey suggests that the name Reverso was applied by the Spaniards to the fish "parce que l'animal parait tourné *au rebours*, quand il se fixe." ("Hist. Nat. de Cuba," II., p. 249). Peter Martyr offers a like explanation.

<sup>7</sup> See Dr. Günther's article on the Remora, in *Ann. Mag. Nat. Hist.* for 1860, Ser. 3, Vol. 5, p. 386.

the Remora as a hunting-fish, and of Diodon appearing under the same guise.

How it happened that in the time of Columbus Diodon should become confused with Remora in the alleged capacity of a hunting-fish is a puzzling question. We may conjecture, however, that the porcupine-fish was among the number of specimens which, as Columbus tells



## Capitulum. xxxvj.

**E** Tbenay vel Echyni. ysið. Eibenays  
parvus ⁊ semipedalis piscis? nomē  
sumpsit ex eo q̄ nauem adherendorey

FIG. 1. EARLIEST KNOWN FIGURE INTENDED TO REPRESENT THE REMORA (*Eche-neis*) OR "SHIP-STAYER." From the second edition of J. von Cube's "Hortus Sanitatis." Leipzig, 1490.

us in the journal of his first voyage, he ordered to be salted and carried back to Spain.<sup>8</sup> One of these was thought by Cuvier to have been the

<sup>8</sup> In the journal of the first voyage, part of the entry for Friday, November 16, 1492, reads as follows: "The sailors also fished with nets, and, among many others, caught a fish which was exactly like a pig, not like a tunny, but all covered with a very hard skin, without a soft place except the tail and the eyes, and an opening on the under side for voiding the superfluities. It was ordered to be salted, to bring home for the sovereigns to see."

Still earlier, under date of October 16, Columbus wrote this entry, which may be compared in style with the language quoted from Bernaldez in describing the Queen's Gardens:

"Here the fish are so unlike ours that it is wonderful. Some are of the shape of dories, and of the finest colors in the world, blue, yellow, red and other tints,

*Figura hac desumpta est ex tabula quadam descriptionis orbis terrarum.*

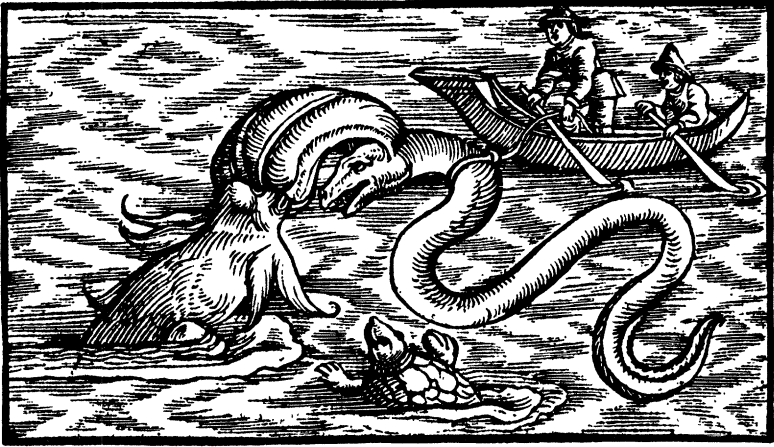


FIG. 2. FISHING WITH THE REMORA, AS RELATED BY COLUMBUS. From Conrad Gesner's "*Historiæ Animalium*," Lib. IV, 1558.

trunk-fish; and another may well have been *Diodon*, these two forms being especially suitable for preservation, and as a matter of fact were well represented in the primitive museums of the time.<sup>9</sup> And being exhibited at the Court of Spain, one can conceive that the legend of the "reverso" became associated with this fish, and also the tale of its being trained for the capture of other fish.

So much for the original sources of the "Reversus" fishing incident: let us now consider its credibility. Humboldt, a century ago, gave full credence to the narrative, as related by Ferdinand Columbus, and conjectured that the species of sucking-fish employed by the natives at Queen's Gardens was probably *Echeneis naucrates*.<sup>10</sup> He also recalled that the French naturalist Commerson had noted among the inhabitants of Mozambique a similar use of the Remora for the capture of marine turtles; and cited Dampier (erroneously, however) and Captain Rogers to the same effect. From still another source, namely, the voyage of the Swedish traveler Andrew Sparrman,<sup>11</sup> we learn of African natives near the Cape of Good Hope making use of the Remora in identical manner for the capture of marine turtles.

all painted in various ways, and the colors are so bright that there is not a man who would not be astonished, and would not take great delight in seeing them. There are also whales. I saw no beasts in the island [of Cuba] of any kind, except parrots and lizards."

<sup>9</sup> See G. Brown Goode on "American Trunk-fishes," *Proc. U. S. Nat. Museum*, 1879, pp. 261-283.

<sup>10</sup> "Recueil d'Observ. Zool.," II., p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> "Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope." London, 1785. Paris, 1787. (French ed., II., p. 431.)



In order that the reader may judge of the similarity of the accounts of African and West Indian fishing with the Remora, we present at this point an English rendering of Commerson's observations. The original is found in Lacépède's treatise on Fishes.

The Indian Remora, *Echeneis naucrates*, is very common about the coasts of Mozambique, where it is sometimes made use of for the following very singular manner of catching turtles. A ring is fastened round the tail of the fish, in such a manner as to prevent its escape, and a long cord fastened to the ring. When thus prepared, the fish is carried in a vessel of sea-water, and when the boatmen observe a turtle sleeping, as is the frequent habit of those animals, on the surface of the water, they approach as near as possible without disturbing it; and then throwing the Remora into the sea, and giving it the proper length of cord, it soon attaches itself to the under side of the sleeping turtle, which is thus easily drawn to the boat by the fishermen.<sup>12</sup>

The distinguished ichthyologist, Dr. Albert Günther, in referring to the accounts of Commerson and others, expresses doubt as to their genuineness, and states that they appear to have originated rather from an experiment than from regular practise. Dr. D. S. Jordan, also, doubts whether the large *Echeneis naucrates*, which he has studied in Cuba, was ever practically used in the manner described. We are permitted to quote the views of this authority as communicated in a personal letter. This reads in part:



FIG. 3. AN ILLUSTRATION FROM OGILEY'S AMERICA (1671) REPRESENTING THE SCENE DESCRIBED BY COLUMBUS IN FISHING WITH THE "REVERSUS" NEAR CUBA.

<sup>12</sup> Shaw's "General Zoology," 1808, II., p. 209.

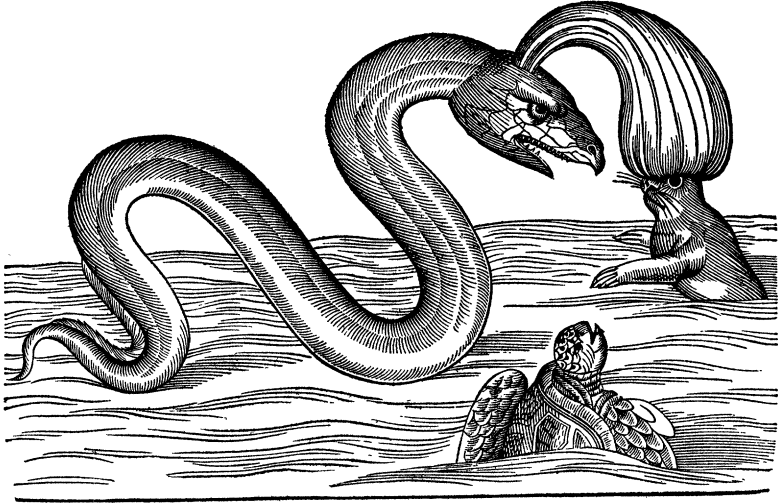


FIG. 4. THE REMORA, OR EEL-LIKE VARIETY OF THE REVERSUS. From Aldrovandii 'De Piscibus,' 1628.

The minute the shark to which *E. naucrates* has fastened itself is drawn out of the water, it loosens its hold, and gets out of the way in a hurry. I do not think it could be trusted to fetch in a turtle, or any other large fish; and I never knew it to cling to any small fish. The smaller sucking-fish, *Remora remora*, clings tight. I have drawn up big sharks in the mid-Pacific with the Remora attached, and it wouldn't let go. Dr. Gilbert tells me that in Japan he has taken them off from sharks and kept them in the aquarium. They clung tight to the glass, not leaving it to swallow small fish until these came very close. But Remora, rarely exceeding 16 inches in length, could never be used in fishing and the big *Echeneis* doesn't "sit tight." The name "Reversus" seems to me to come from the fact that these fish, having black bellies, seem to be wrong-side up. Often when attached to other fish they are in that position.

On the other hand, some modern instances of fishing with the Remora have been reported, as for instance, the account published by Mr. Holmwood, a British consul in Madagascar, published in the *Proceedings of the London Zoological Society* for 1884, page 411. Dr. E. W. Gudger, who has been studying the Remora, has collected a number of apparently trustworthy observations; and Dr. Townsend, director of the New York Aquarium, has made practical tests of the adhesive power of these fishes. Dr. Townsend writes:

We used to catch a good many while I was cruising with the *Albatross*. When these fishes were thrown into tubes or buckets of sea water they took hold at once with their sucking discs and could not be detached without using considerable force. I have tied a stout cord around the tail of a two-foot Remora which attached itself to the inside of a two-gallon galvanized pail half-filled with water, and was then able to lift the pail, fish and water without the fish's grip giving way an inch. The pail and water weighed twenty-one pounds. The largest Remora in the aquarium is thirty-two inches long, and its cephalic disc is seven inches long and three inches wide. I have no doubt that with this fish attached to a good-sized sea turtle you could hand in the latter without difficulty.

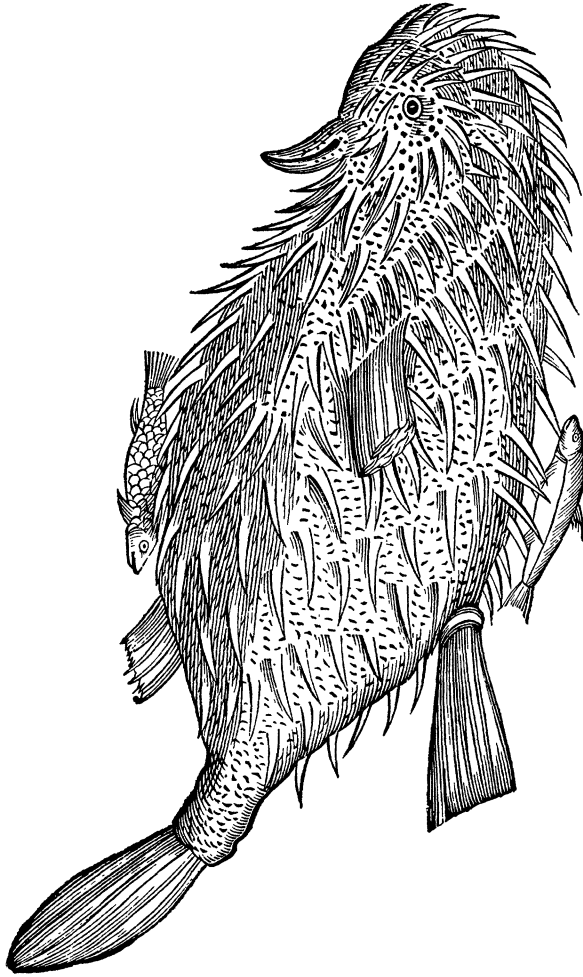


FIG. 5. DIODON, OR SO-CALLED "SPINOUS VARIETY OF THE REVERSUS." From Aldrovandis' "De Piscibus," 1638.

Another genus of sucking fish larger and more powerful than either the Remora or *Echeneis* is *Remiligia*, which apparently has the habit of attaching itself regularly to the bodies of Cetacea, and for that reason has come infrequently to the attention of ichthyologists.<sup>13</sup>

If we come now to form an opinion as to the credibility of the original narrative of the great discoverer, weighing it in the light of modern information, there would appear to be no sufficient reason for rejecting it as improbable or the creation of a florid imagination.

<sup>13</sup> See a note on *Remora australis* by John T. Nichols, in *Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, XXXII., 1913, p. 182.